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READING IN THE MT. VERNON (INDIANA) CITY SCHOOLS

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I. PRIMARY

The reading work in the primary grades is done as well in the Mt. Vernon city schools as it is in most cities of its size and better than in some. The teachers feel that they have solved the reading problem in the first three grades. A total of eighteen to twenty different readers have been covered by the time the pupils have completed Grade IIIA.

II. THE PROBLEM STATED

The greatest problem in reading for several years past has been in Grades IV, V, and VI. According to statistics which were worked out, it was found that the poorest reading done in the city schools was in these grades. Especially was this noticeable among the boys.

The children read orally very poorly, but seemed to be able to understand fairly well what they read silently.

III. A SOLUTION ATTEMPTED

In one of the addresses given last fall at the Indiana State Teachers Association, it was suggested that pupils of Grades IV, V, and VI are beginning to think more rapidly than they are able to articulate words; the oral reading of children of these grades is therefore poorly done. It was also suggested that, in view of the fact that most of the reading done by adults is silent reading, it would be better to emphasize more strongly silent reading in these grades and to place less stress on oral reading.

In pursuance of these suggestions, a meeting of all teachers who teach reading in the city schools was called on November 1, 1915,

at which the reading problem was fully discussed. It was resolved to change the plan of teaching reading in Grades IV, V, and VI so as to conform to the suggestions referred to above.

IV. PLANS OF PROCEDURE

The following procedure was determined upon, and the reading work in the grades mentioned has been done along this line since November 1, 1915:

First, oral reading was to be required two or three times per week in Grades IV, V, and VI instead of five times per week as had been the former practice. It was decided that selections assigned for oral reading should have a definite value to the children. In other words, the children were not to be asked to read just for the mere sake of reading aloud. A definite motive for the reading was to be assigned, such as a beautiful description of a landscape, conversations between characters, etc. The purpose of this plan was so to motivate the oral reading as to remove, as far as possible, self-consciousness from the child and to supply him with a real purpose for reading. The teachers realized that a much more thorough preparation of the lesson would be necessary on their part to carry out this plan successfully.

Secondly, it was further decided to supply motivation for study and for interpretation of the printed page by means of questions and suggestions given by the teacher either orally or written upon the blackboard. This plan was to be followed on the days when children were not to be asked to read orally. The children were told that they would find the answers to the questions in the reading-lesson assigned. This was done to supply real motivated work for the reading study-period—a period which is often wasted under the old method of teaching reading. The children were to be held absolutely responsible individually for having definitely and accurately interpreted the printed page.

Thirdly, in taking up this new measure, the teachers felt that a big problem would be the recitation period proper, since oral reading was to be dispensed with three times per week. It was resolved to spend the time of the regular recitation period in discussing the questions or suggestions which had been assigned and thereby to

determine whether or not the children had grasped the thought during the study-period. Other supplemental questions were to be asked and the time of the regular recitation period was to be devoted to interesting, living, vital discussion. In some instances, the plan was to spend the time of the regular recitation period in having the children write the answers to questions which the teacher would write on the board. It was thought wise to keep interest at a high pitch.

Fourthly, further to stimulate the work in reading, and with the thought that children should be encouraged to read a large amount, the children were to be urged to read a large number of books from the public library, the understanding being that the books read were to be approved by the teacher and the librarian. Successfully to carry out this part of the plan, the book committee of the public library was asked to buy a large number of books suitable for pupils of the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. To this request the library board willingly responded and several hundred volumes of suitable books were placed on the shelves of the public library. The teachers realized that in undertaking this part of the plan they would be forced to read a large number of books which they otherwise would not have read.

Fifthly, it was decided to have occasional reviews of entire books or selections to be given in the class and to be followed by a general discussion. It was deemed best to have two or more pupils read the same book or selections, so that each of them might take part in the discussion and so that teachers might discern the differences in interpretation. Careful study of the reading ability, home training, sex, etc., of the various children in approving books or selections for reading or study was determined upon. In other words, each child was to be assigned a selection suitable for him or her as far as the librarian and teacher were able to determine.

V. RESULTS

Although this scheme of teaching reading in Grades IV, V, and VI has been in operation only four months, and although it has been tried by teachers who had never used this method of teaching

reading, the results have already become noticeable. A summary follows:

1. The children have come to love the reading period. (Formerly they seemed to dread it and to come to this period with a lifeless attitude.)

2. The questions and suggestions given in advance by the teachers have caused them to make a more definite advance preparation and for this reason they have become more efficient in their teaching of reading.

3. A large number of books from the public library have been read. (It has become necessary to place an extra table in each room so that the children may have a place to keep the library books.) Many children who never before were seen in the public library have become regular visitors.

4. We do not feel that our oral reading has become any better, or at least much better; however, the time which was formerly lost, or worse than lost, in the teaching of oral reading five days per week, is being saved for the pupils. The present VIB class will have read at least ten times as much reading matter as the VIB class of one year ago.

5. It is too early to say what the influence on the seventh grade reading will be; however, we believe that children "learn to read by reading" and we are anticipating much better work in reading in Grade VII.

6. Probably the most vital result is the renewed and stimulated interest of teachers in the subject of reading. They have been forced to become acquainted with the books available in the public library. Many of these books have been read by them and have been discussed in the classes. The teachers as well as the pupils have become regular library patrons.

VI. CLOSING STATEMENT

This work has not been carried on far enough to be judged scientifically; however, the results indicated under V show conclusively that much more reading has been done and better done than was possible under the old system. The plan is to make a comparative annual or semiannual report for a period of three

years. This will allow time for most of the children who are now in these grades to be as far advanced as Grade VIIB. The teachers are enthusiastic over the results obtained thus far. They are earnest and conscientious in their work. The reading work has been vitalized so that both teachers and pupils are glad to have the reading period come. This may not prove to be the best scheme of procedure; however, there is no possible doubt but that some plan, different from that formerly used, must be adopted in the teaching of reading in Grades IV, V, and VI.